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MY YEAR IN A LOG CABIN

BY

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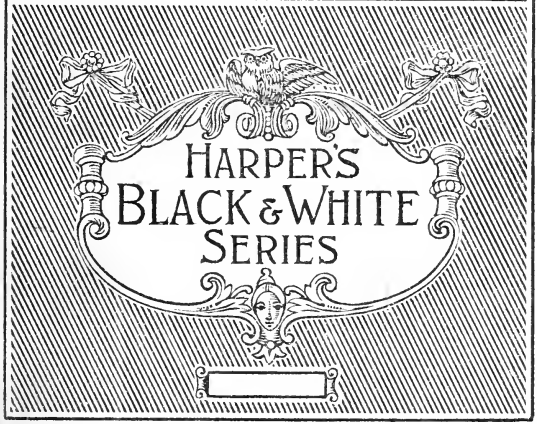

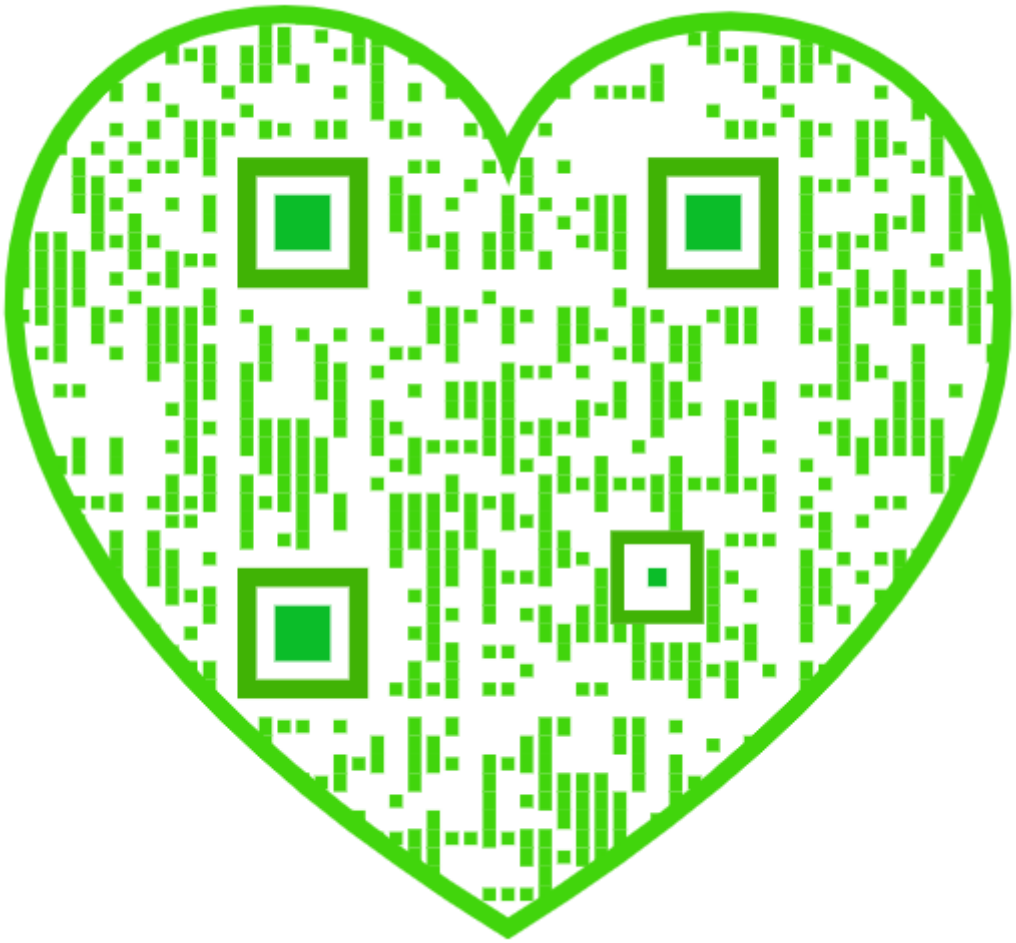

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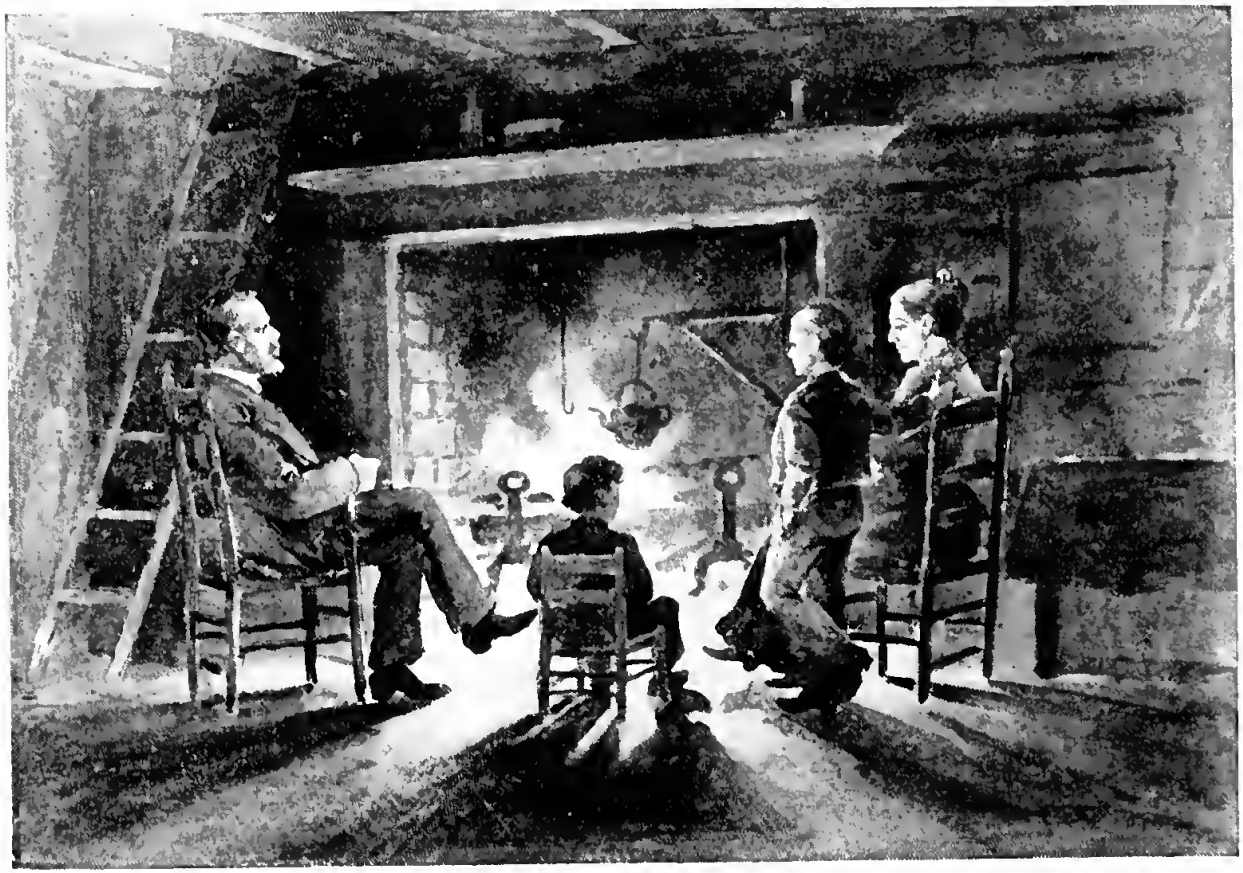

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W. D. HOWELLS

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MY YEAR IN A LOG-CABIN

A BIT OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I

In the fall of the year 1850 my father removed with his family from the city of D——, where we had been living, to a property on the Little Miami River, to take charge of a saw-mill and grist-mill, and superintend their never-accomplished transformation into paper-mills. The property belonged to his brothers—physicians and druggists—who were to follow later, when they had disposed of their business in town. My father left a disastrous newspaper enterprise behind him when he came out to apply his mechanical taste and his knowledge of farming to the care of their place. Early in the century his parents had brought him to Ohio from Wales, and his boyhood was

passed in the new country, where pioneer customs and traditions were still rife, and for him it was like renewing the wild romance of those days to take up once more the life in a log-cabin interrupted by forty years' sojourn in matter-of-fact dwellings of frame and brick.

He had a passion for nature as tender and genuine and as deeply moralized as that of the English poets, by whom it had been nourished; and he taught us children all that he felt for the woods and fields and open skies; all our walks had led into them and under them. It was the fond dream of his boys to realize the trials and privations which he had painted for them in such rosy hues, and even if the only clap-boarded dwelling on the property had not been occupied by the miller, we should have disdained it for the log-cabin in which we took up our home till we could build a new house.

Our cabin stood close upon the road, but behind it broadened a cornfield of eighty acres. They still built log-cabins for dwellings in that region forty years ago, but ours must have been nearly half

a century old when we went into it. It had been recently vacated by an old Virginian couple, who had long occupied it, and we decided that it needed some repairs to make it habitable even for a family inured to hardship by dauntless imaginations, and accustomed to retrospective discomforts of every kind.

So before we all came out of it a deputation of adventurers put it in what rude order they could. They glazed the narrow windows, they relaid the rotten floor, they touched (too sketchily, as it afterwards appeared) the broken roof, and they papered the walls of the ground-floor rooms. Perhaps it was my father's love of literature which inspired him to choose newspapers for this purpose; at any rate, he did so, and the effect, as I remember it, was not without its decorative qualities.

He had used a barrel of papers bought at the nearest post-office, where they had been refused by the persons to whom they had been experimentally sent by the publisher, and the whole first page was taken up by a story, which broke off in

the middle of a sentence at the foot of the last column, and tantalized us forever with fruitless conjecture as to the fate of the hero and heroine. I really suppose that a cheap wall-paper could have been got for the same money, though it might not have seemed so economical.

I am not sure that the use of the newspapers was not a tributary reminiscence of my father's pioneer life; I cannot remember that it excited any comment in the neighbors, who were frank with their opinions of everything else we did. But it does not greatly matter; the newspapers hid the walls and the stains with which our old Virginian predecessor, who had the habit of chewing tobacco in bed, had ineffaceably streaked the plastering near the head of his couch.

The cabin, rude as it was, was not without its sophistications, its concessions to the spirit of modern luxury. The logs it was built of had not been left rounded, as they grew, but had been squared in a saw-mill, and the crevices between them had not been chinked with moss and daubed with clay in the true pioneer

fashion, but had been neatly plastered with mortar, and the chimney, instead of being a structure of clay-covered sticks, was solidly laid in courses of stone.

Within, however, it was all that could be asked for by the most romantic of pioneer families. It was six feet wide and a yard deep, its cavernous maw would easily swallow a back-log eighteen inches through, and we piled in front the sticks of hickory cord-wood as high as we liked. We made a perfect trial of it when we came out to put the cabin in readiness for the family, and when the hickory had dropped into a mass of tinkling, snapping, bristling embers we laid our rashers of bacon and our slices of steak upon them, and tasted with the appetite of tired youth the flavors of the camp and the wildwood in the captured juices.

I suppose it took a day or two to put the improvements which I have mentioned upon the cabin, but I am not certain. At night we laid our mattresses on the sweet new oak plank of the floor, and slept hard—in every sense. Once I remember waking, and seeing the man who

was always the youngest of his boys sitting upright on his bed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Oh, resting!" he answered; and that gave us one of the Heaven-blessed laughs with which we could blow away almost any cloud of care or pain.

II

In due time the whole family took up its abode in the cabin. The household furniture had been brought out and bestowed in its scanty space, the bookcase had been set up, and the unbound books packed in easily accessible barrels.

There yet remained some of our possessions to follow, chief of which was the cow; for in those simple days people kept cows in town, and it fell to me to help my father drive her out to her future home. We got on famously, talking of the way-side things so beautiful in the beautiful autumnal day, all panoplied in the savage splendor of its painted leaves, and of the poems and histories so dear to the boy who limped barefooted by his father's side, with his eye on the cow and his mind on Cervantes and Shakespeare, on—

> "The glory that was Greece,
> And the grandeur that was Rome."

But the cow was very slow—far slower than the boy's thoughts—and it had fallen night and was already thick dark when we had made the twelve miles, and stood under the white-limbed phantasmal sycamores beside the tail-race of the grist-mill, and questioned how we should get across with our charge. We did not know how deep the water was, but we knew it was very cold, and we would rather not wade it.

The only thing to do seemed to be for one of us to run up under those sycamores to the saw-mill, cross the head-race there, and come back to receive the cow on the other side of the tail-race. But the boy could not bring himself either to go or stay. I do not know just how it is with a boy's world now, but at that time it was a very dangerous world. It was full of ghosts, for one thing, and it abounded in Indians on the war-path, and amateurs of kidnapping and murder of all sorts.

The kind-hearted father urged, but he would not compel. You cannot well use force with a boy with whom you have been talking literature and philosophy

for half a day. We could see the lights in the cabin cheerfully twinkling, and we shouted to those within, but no one heard us. We called and called in vain. Nothing but the cold rush of the tail-race, the dry rustle of the sycamore leaves, and the homesick lowing of the cow replied.

We determined to drive her across, and pursue her with sticks and stones through the darkness beyond, and then run at the top of our speed to the saw-mill, and get back to take her in custody again. We carried out our part of the plan perfectly, but the cow had apparently not entered into it with intelligence or sympathy.

When we reached the tail-race again she was nowhere to be found, and no appeals of "Boss" or "Suky" or "Subose" availed. She must have instantly turned again, and retraced, in the darkness which seemed to have swallowed her up, the weary steps of the day, for she was found in her old home in town the next morning. At any rate, she had abandoned the father to the conversation of his son, for the time being, and the son had nothing to say.

III

I DO not remember now just how it was that we came by the different "animals of the horse kind," as my father humorously called them, which we housed in an old log-stable not far from our cabin. They must have been a temporary supply until a team worthy our new sky-blue wagon could be found.

One of them was a colossal sorrel, inexorably hide-bound, whose barrel, as I believe the horsemen call the body, showed every hoop upon it. He had a feeble, foolish whimper of a voice, and we nicknamed him "Baby." His companion was a dun mare, who had what my father at once called an italic foot, in recognition of the emphatic slant at which she carried it when upon her unwilling travels.

Then there was a small, self-opinionated gray pony, which, I think, came from one

of the saw-mill hands, and which was of no service conjecturable after this lapse of time. We boys rode him barebacked, and he used to draw a buggy, which he finally ran away with. I suppose we found him useful in the representation of some of the Indian fights which we were always dramatizing, and I dare say he may have served our turn as an Arab charger, when the Moors of Granada made one of their sallies upon the camp of the Spaniards, and discharged their javelins into it—their javelins were the long, admirably straight and slender iron-weeds that grew by the river. This menagerie was constantly breaking bounds and wandering off; and I believe that it was chiefly employed in hunting itself up, its different members taking turns in remaining in the pasture or stable, to be ridden after those that had strayed into the woods.

The origin of a large and eloquent flock of geese is lost in an equal obscurity. I recall their possession simply as an accomplished fact, and I associate their desolate cries with the windy dark of

rainy November nights, so that they must at least have come into our hands after the horses. They were fenced into a clayey area next the cabin for safe-keeping, where, perpetually waddling about in a majestic disoccupation, they patted the damp ground down to the hardness and smoothness of a brick yard. Throughout the day they conversed tranquilly together, but by night they woke, goose after goose, to send forth a long clarion alarum, blending in a general concert at last, to assure one another of their safety.

We must have intended to pluck them in the spring, but it never came to that. They stole their nests early in March, and entered upon the nurture of their young before we could prevent it; and it would then have been barbarous to pluck these mothers of families. Some of their nests we found, notably one under the smoke-house, where the adventurous boy who discovered it was attacked in the dark by its owner and bitten in the nose, to the natural gratification of those who had urged him to the enterprise. But he

brought away some of the eggs, and we had them fried, and I know nothing that conveys a vivider idea of inexhaustible abundance than a fried goose-egg.

IV

THE geese were not much profit—they had to be sold, finally, for little or nothing; but their soft and woolly goslings were a great pleasure to all the children, who were plunged in grief when the miller's sow made a foray among them.

This was a fierce and predatory animal that was in some sort a neighborhood terror. She made her lair in the reeds by the river-side, breaking out a perfect circle, which she kept against all comers, especially boys, till her young were born; then she returned to her sty near the miller's house, convenient to the young turkeys, chickens, and goslings, leading forth her brood in a savage defiance which no one dared to front, except the miller, who did so with a shot-gun at times, when her depredations became outrageous. Wherever she appeared the

children ran screaming, and the boldest boy was glad of the top rail of a fence.

She was, in fact, a wild beast; but our own pigs were very social creatures. We had got some of them, I believe, from the old Virginians whom we had succeeded in the cabin, and these kept, as far as they could, the domestic habits in which that affectionate couple had indulged them. They would willingly have shared our fireside with us, humble as it was, and being repelled, they took up their quarters on cold nights at the warm base of the chimney without, where we could hear them, as long as we kept awake, disputing the places next to the stones.

All this was horrible to my mother, whose housewifely instincts were perpetually offended by the rude conditions of our life, and who justly regarded it as a return to a state which, if poetic, was also not far from barbaric. But children, and more particularly boys, take every natural thing as naturally as savages, and we never thought our pigs were other than amusing. In that country pigs were called to their feed with long

cries of "Pig, pig, pooee, poe-e-e!" but ours were taught to come at a whistle, and, on hearing it, would single themselves out of the neighbors' pigs, and come rushing from all quarters to the scattered corn with an intelligence we were proud of.

V

As long as the fall weather lasted, and well through the mild winter of that latitude, our chief recreation, where all our novel duties were delightful, was hunting with the long smooth-bore shot-gun which had descended laterally from one of our uncles, and supplied the needs of the whole family of boys in the chase. Never less than two of us went out with it at once, and generally there were three. This enabled us to beat up the game over a wide extent of country, and while the eldest did the shooting, left the other to rush upon him as soon as he fired with tumultuous cries of "Did you hit it? Did you hit it?" Usually he had not hit it, though now and then our murderous young blood was stirred by the death agonies of some of the poor creatures whose destruction boys exult in.

We fell upon the wounded squirrels

which we brought down on rare occasions, and put them to death with what I must now call a sickening ferocity. If sometimes the fool dog, the weak-minded Newfoundland pup we were rearing, rushed upon the game first, and the squirrel avenged his death upon the dog's nose, that was pure gain, and the squirrel had the applause of all his other enemies. Yet we were none of us cruel; we never wantonly killed things that could not be eaten; we should have thought it sacrilege to shoot a robin or a turtle-dove, but we were willing to be amused, and these were the chances of war.

The woods were full of squirrels, which especially abounded in the wood-pastures, as we called the lovely dells where the greater part of the timber was thinned out to let the cattle range and graze. They were of all sorts—gray, and black, and even big red fox-squirrels, a variety I now suppose extinct. When the spring opened we hunted them in the poplar woods, whither they resorted in countless numbers for the sweetness in the cups of the tulip-tree blossoms.

I recall with a thrill one memorable morning in such woods—early, after an overnight rain, when the vistas hung full of a delicate mist that the sun pierced to kindle a million fires in the drops still pendulous from leaf and twig. I can smell the tulip blossoms and the odor of the tree-bark yet, and the fresh, strong fragrance of the leafy mould under my bare feet; and I can hear the rush of the squirrels on the bark of the trunks, or the swish of their long, plunging leaps from bough to bough in the air-tops. I hope we came away without any of them.

The only one I ever killed was a black squirrel, which fell from aloft and lodged near the first crotch of a tall elm. The younger brother, who followed me as I followed my elder, climbed up to get the squirrel, but when he mounted into the crotch he found himself with his back tight against the main branch, and unable either to go up or come down. It was a terrible moment, which we deplored with many tears and vain cries for help.

It was no longer a question of getting the dead squirrel, but the live boy to the

ground. It appeared to me that to make a rope fast to the limb, and then have him slip down, hand over hand, was the best way; only, we had no rope, and I could not have got it to him if we had. I proposed going for help, but my brother would not consent to be left alone; and, in fact, I could not bear the thought of leaving him perched up there, however securely, fifty feet from the earth. I might have climbed up and pull him out, but we decided that this would only be swifter destruction.

I really cannot tell how he contrived to free himself, or why he is not in that tree to this day. The squirrel is.

In a region where the cornfields and wheat-fields were often fifty and sixty acres in extent there was a plenty of quail, but I remember again but one victim to my gun. We set figure-four traps to catch them; but they were shrewder arithmeticians than we, and solved these problems without harm to themselves. After they began to mate, and the air was full of their soft, amorous whistling, we searched to find their nests, and had

better luck, though we were forbidden to rob the nests when we found them; and in June, when the pretty little mother strutted across the lanes at the head of her tiny brood, we had to content ourselves with the near spectacle of her cunning counterfeit of disability at sight of us, fluttering and tumbling in the dust till her chicks could hide themselves. We had read of that trick, and were not deceived; but we were charmed just the same.

It is a trick that all birds know, and I had it played upon me by the mother snipe and mother wild-duck that haunted our dam, as well as by the quail. With the snipe, once, I had a fancy to see how far the mother would carry the ruse, and so ran after her; but in doing this I trod on one of her young—a soft, gray mite, not distinguishable from the gray pebbles where it ran. I took it tenderly up in my hand, and it is a pang to me yet to think how it gasped once and died. A boy is a strange mixture—as the man who comes after him is. I should not have minded knocking over that whole brood of snipes

with my gun, if I could; but this poor little death was somehow very personal in its appeal.

I had no such regrets in respect to the young wild-ducks, which, indeed, I had no such grievous accident with. I left their mother to flounder and flutter away as she would, and took to the swamp where her young sought refuge from me. There I spent half a day wading about in waters that were often up to my waist, and full of ugly possibilities of mud-turtles and water-snakes, trying to put my hand on one of the ducklings. They rose everywhere else, and dived again after a breath of air; but at last one of them came up in my very grasp. It did not struggle, but how its wild heart bounded against my hand! I carried it home to show it and boast of my capture, and then I took it back to its native swamp. It dived instantly, and I hope it found its bereaved family somewhere under the water.

VI

THE winter, which was so sore a trial for my mother in the log-cabin, and was not, perhaps, such a poetic rapture for my father as he had hoped, was a long delight to their children.

The centre of our life in the cabin was, of course, the fireplace, whose hugeness and whose mighty fires remained a wonder with us. There was a crane in the chimney and dangling pot-hooks, and until the cooking-stove could be set up in an adjoining shed the cooking had to be done on the hearth, and the bread baked in a Dutch-oven in the hot ashes. We had always heard of this operation, which was a necessity of early days; and nothing else, perhaps, realized them so vividly for us as the loaf laid in the iron-lidded skillet, which was then covered with ashes and heaped with coals.

I am not certain that the bread tasted

any better for the romantic picturesqueness of its experience, or that the corn-meal, mixed warm from the mill and baked on an oak plank set up before the fire, had merits beyond the hoe-cake of art; but I think there can be no doubt that new corn grated to meal when just out of the milk, and then moulded and put in like manner to brown in the glow of such embers, would still have the sweetness that was incomparable then. When the maple sap started in February, we tried the scheme we had cherished all winter of making with it tea which should be in a manner self-sugared. But the scheme was a failure—we spoiled the sap without sweetening the tea.

We sat up late before the big fire at night, our faces burning in the glow, and our backs and feet freezing in the draft that swept in from the imperfectly closing door, and then we boys climbed to our bed in the loft. We reached it by a ladder, which we should have been glad to pull up after us as a protection against Indians in the pioneer fashion; but, with the advancement of modern lux-

ury, the ladder had been nailed to the floor.

Once aloft, however, we were in a domain sacred to the past. The rude floor rattled and wavered loosely under our tread, and the window in the gable stood open or shut at its own will. There were cracks in the shingles, through which we could see the stars, when there were stars, and which, when the first snow came, let the flakes sift in upon the floor. I should not like to step out of bed into a snow-wreath in the morning now; but then I was glad to do it, and so far from thinking that or anything in our life a hardship, I counted it all joy.

Our barrels of paper-covered books were stowed away in that loft, and overhauling them one day I found a paper copy of the poems of a certain Henry W. Longfellow, then wholly unknown to me; and while the old grist-mill, whistling and wheezing to itself, made a vague music in my ears, my soul was filled with this new, strange sweetness. I read the "Spanish Student" there, and the "Coplas de Manrique," and the solemn and ever-beautiful "Voices of the Night."

There were other books in those barrels which I must have read also, but I remember only these, that spirited me again to Spain, where I had already been with Irving, and led me to attack seriously the old Spanish grammar which had been knocking about our house ever since my father bought it from a soldier of the Mexican War.

But neither these nor any other books made me discontented with the small-boy's world about me. They made it a little more populous with visionary shapes, but that was well, and there was room for them all. It was not darkened with cares, and the duties in it were not many.

We had always worked, and we older boys had our axes now, and believed ourselves to be clearing a piece of woods which covered a hill belonging to the milling property. The timber was black-walnut and oak and hickory, and I cannot think we made much havoc in it; but we must have felled some of the trees, for I remember helping to cut them into saw-logs with the cross-cut saw, and the rapture we had in starting our logs from the

brow of the hill and watching their whirling rush to the bottom. We experimented, as boys will, and we felled one large hickory with the saw instead of the axe, and barely escaped with our lives when it suddenly split near the bark, and the butt shot out between us. I preferred buckeye and sycamore trees for my own axe; they were of no use when felled, but they chopped delightfully.

VII

THEY grew abundantly on the island which formed another feature of our oddly distributed property. This island was by far its most fascinating feature, and for us boys it had all the charm and mystery which have in every land and age endeared islands to the heart of man. It was not naturally an island, but had been made so by the mill-races bringing the water from the dam, and emptying into the river again below the mills. Yet no atoll in the far Pacific could have been more satisfactory to us. It was low and flat, and was half under water in every spring freshet, but it had precious areas grown up to tall iron-weeds, which, withering and hardening in the frost, supplied us with the spears and darts for our Indian fights.

The island was always our battle-ground, and it resounded in the long afternoons

with the war-cries of the encountering tribes. We had a book in those days called *Western Adventure*, which was made up of tales of pioneer and frontier life, and we were constantly reading ourselves back into that life. I have wondered often since who wrote or compiled that book; we had printed it ourselves in D——, from the stereotype plates of some temporary publisher whose name is quite lost to me. This book, and *Howe's Collections for the History of Ohio*, were full of stories of the backwoodsmen and warriors who had made our State a battle-ground for nearly fifty years, and our own life in the log-cabin gave new zest to the tales of "Simon Kenton, the Pioneer," and "Simon Girty, the Renegade;" of the captivity of Crawford, and his death at the stake; of the massacre of the Moravian Indians at Gnadenhütten; of the defeat of St. Clair and the victory of Wayne; of a hundred other wild and bloody incidents of our annals. We read of them at night till we were afraid to go up the ladder to the ambuscade of savages in our loft, but we fought them over by day

with undaunted spirits. With our native romance I sometimes mingled with my own reading a strain of old-world poetry, and "Hamet el Zegri" and the "Unknown Spanish Knight," encountered in the Vega before Granada on our island, while Adam Poe and Bigfoot were taking breath from their deadly struggle in the waters of the Ohio.

VIII

WHEN the spring opened we broke up the sod on a more fertile part of the island, and planted a garden there beside our field of corn. We planted long rows of sweet-potatoes, and a splendid profusion of melons, which duly came up with their empty seed-shells fitted like helmets over their heads, and were mostly laid low the next day by the cut-worms which swarmed in the upturned sod. I have no recollection of really enjoying any of the visionary red-cores and white-cores which had furnished us a Barmecide feast when we planted their seed, and so I suppose none of them grew.

But the sweet-potatoes had better luck. Better luck I did not think it then; their rows seemed interminable to a boy set to clear their slopes of purslane with his hoe; though I do not now imagine they were necessarily a day's journey in length.

Neither could the cornfield beside them have been very vast; but again reluctant boyhood has a different scale for the measurement of such things, and perhaps if I were now set to hill it up I might think differently about its size.

I dare say it was not well cared for, but an inexhaustible wealth of ears came into the milk just at the right moment for our enjoyment. We had then begun to build our new house. The frame had been raised, as the custom of that country still was, in a frolic of the neighbors, to whom unlimited coffee and a boiled ham had been served in requital of their civility, and now we were kiln-drying the green oak flooring-boards. To do this we had built a long skeleton hut, and had set the boards upright all around it and roofed it with them, and in the middle of it we had set a huge old cast-iron stove, in which we kept a roaring fire.

This fire had to be watched night and day, and it never took less than three or four boys, and often all the boys of the neighborhood, to watch it, and to turn and change the boards. The summer of

Southern Ohio is surely no joke, and it must have been cruelly hot in that kiln; but I remember nothing of that; I remember only the luxury of the green corn, whose ears we spitted on the points of long sticks and roasted in the red-hot stove; we must almost have roasted our own heads at the same time.

But I suppose that if the heat within the kiln or without ever became intolerable, we escaped from it and from our light summer clothing, reduced almost to a Greek simplicity, in a delicious plunge in the river. In those days one went in swimming (we did not say bathing) four or five times a day with advantage and refreshment; anything more than that was, perhaps, thought unwholesome.

We had our choice of the shallows, where the long ripple was warmed through and through by the sun in which it sparkled, or the swimming-hole, whose depths were almost as tepid, but were here and there interwoven with mysterious cool under-currents.

We believed that there were snapping-turtles and water-snakes in our swimming

holes, though we never saw any. There were some fish in the river, chiefly suckers and catfish in the spring, when the water was high and turbid, and in summer the bream that we call sunfish in the West, and there was a superstition, never verified by me, of bass. The truth is, we did not care much for fishing, though of course that had its turn in the pleasures of our rolling year.

There were crawfish, both hard shell and soft, to be had at small risk, and mussels in plenty. Their shells furnished us the material for many rings zealously begun, never finished; we did not see why they did not produce pearls; but perhaps they were all eaten up, before the pearl-disease could attack them, by the musk-rats, before whose holes their shells were heaped. Sometimes we saw a muskrat smoothly swimming to or from his hole, and making a long straight line through the water, and lusted for his blood; but he always chose the times for these excursions when we had not our trusty smooth-bore with us, and we stoned him in vain.

I have spoken of the freshets which

sometimes inundated our island; but these were never very serious. They fertilized it with the loam they brought down from richer lands above, and they strewed its low shores with stranded drift. But there were so many dams on the river that no freshet could gather furious head upon it; at the worst, it could back up upon us the slack water from the mill-dam below us. Once this took place in such degree that our wheels stood still in their flooded tubs. This was a truly tremendous time. The event appears in the retrospect to have covered many days; I dare say it covered a half-day at most.

Of skating on the river I think we had none. The winter often passes in that latitude without making ice enough for that sport, and there could not have been much sledding either. We read, enviously enough, in Peter Parley's *First Book of History*, of the coasting on Boston Common, and we made some weak-kneed sleds (whose imbecile runners flattened hopelessly under them) when the light snows began to come; but we never had any real coasting, as our elders never

had any real sleighing in the jumpers they made by splitting a hickory sapling for runners, and mounting any sort of rude box upon them. They might often have used sleighs in the mud, however; that was a foot deep on most of the roads, and lasted all winter.

There were not many boys in our neighborhood, and we brothers had to make the most of one another's company. For a little while in the winter some of us went two miles away through the woods to school; but there was not much to be taught a reading family like ours in that log-hut, and I suppose it was not thought worth while to keep us at it. No impression of it remains to me, except the wild, lonesome cooing of the turtle-doves when they began to nest in the neighboring oaks.

IX

We had a poor fellow, named B——, for our saw-miller, whose sad fortunes are vividly associated with the loveliness of the early summer in my mind. He was a hapless, harmless, kindly creature, and he had passed most of his manhood in a sort of peonage to a rich neighboring farmer whom he was hopelessly in debt to, so that I suppose it was like the gift of freedom to him when he came into our employ; but his happiness did not last long.

Within a month or two he was seized with a flux that carried him off after a few days, and then began to attack his family. He had half a dozen children, and they all died, except one boy, who was left with his foolish, simple mother. My oldest brother had helped nurse them, and had watched with them, and seen them die; and it fell to me to go to the

next village one morning and buy linen to make the last two of their shrouds. I mounted the italic-footed mare, bare-backed, as usual, with my legs going to sleep on either side of her, but my brain wildly awake, and set out through the beautiful morning, turned lurid and ghastly by the errand on which I was bent.

When I came back with that linen in my hand it was as if I were accompanied by troops of sheeted dead, from whom that italic-footed nightmare could not be persuaded to escape by any sawing of her mouth, or any thumping of her sides with my bare heels.

I am astonished now that this terror should have been so transient. The little ones were laid with their father and their brothers and sisters in the unfenced graveyard on the top of our hill, where the pigs foraged for acorns above their heads in the fall; and then my sun shone again. So did the sun of the surviving B——s. The mother turned her household goods into ready money, and with this and the wages due her husband bought a changeable silk dress for herself and an oil-cloth cap

for her son, and equipped in these splendors the two set off up the road towards the town of X——, gay, light-hearted in their destitution, and consoled after the bereavement of a single week.

X

OUR new house got on slowly. There were various delays and some difficulties, but it was all intensely interesting, and we watched its growth with eyes that hardly left it night or day. Life in the log-cabin had not become pleasanter with the advance of the summer; we were all impatient to be out of it. We looked forward to our occupation of the new house with an eagerness which even in us boys must have had some sense of present discomfort at the bottom of it. We were to have a parlor, a dining-room, and a library; there were to be three chambers for the family and a spare room; after six months in the log-cabin we could hardly have imagined it, if we had not seen these divisions actually made by the studding.

In that region there is no soft wood. The frame was of oak, and my father decided to have the house weather-boarded

and shingled with black-walnut, which was so much cheaper than pine, and which, left in its natural state, he thought would be agreeable in color. In this neither the carpenter nor any of the neighbors could think with him; the local ideal was brick for a house, and if not that, then white paint and green blinds, and always two front doors; but my father had his way, and our home was fashioned according to his plans.

It appeared to me a palace. I spent all the leisure I had from swimming and Indian fighting and reading in watching the carpenter work, and hearing him talk; his talk was not the wisest, but he thought very well of it himself, and I had so far lapsed from civilization that I stood in secret awe of him, because he came from town—from the pitiful little village, namely, where I went to buy those shrouds.

I try to give merely a child's impressions of our life, which were nearly all delightful; but it must have been hard for my elders, and for my mother especially, who could get no help, or only

briefly and fitfully, in the work that fell to her. What her pleasures were I can scarcely imagine. She was cut off from church-going because we were Swedenborgians; short of Cincinnati, sixty miles away, there was no worship of our faith, and the local preaching was not edifying, theologically or intellectually.

Now and then a New Church minister, of those who used to visit us in town, passed a Sunday with us in the cabin, and that was a rare time of mental and spiritual refreshment. Otherwise, my father read us a service out of the Book of Worship, or a chapter from the Heavenly Arcana; and week-day nights, while the long evenings lasted, he read poetry to us—Scott or Moore or Thomson, or some of the more didactic poets.

In the summer evenings, after her long hard day's work was done, my mother sometimes strolled out upon the island with my father, and loitered on the bank to look at her boys in the river. One such evening I recall, and how sad our gay voices were in the dim, dewy air. My father had built a flat boat, which we

kept on the smooth waters of our dam, and on Sunday afternoons the whole family went out in it. We rowed far up, till we struck the swift current from the mill above us, and then let the boat drift slowly down again.

It does not now seem very exciting, but then to a boy whose sense was open to every intimation of beauty, the silence that sang in our ears, the stillness of the dam, where the low uplands and the fringing sycamores and every rush and grass-blade by the brink perfectly glassed themselves and the vast blue sky overhead, were full of mystery, of divine promise, and holy awe; and life was rich unspeakably.

I recollect the complex effect of these Sunday afternoons as if they were all one sharp event; I recall in like manner the starry summer nights when my brother used to row across the river to the cabin of the B——s, where the poor man and his children lay dying in turn, and I wondered and shuddered at his courage; but there is one night that remains single and peerless in my memory.

My brother and I had been sent on an errand to some neighbor's—for a bag of potatoes or a joint of meat; it does not matter—and we had been somehow belated, so that it was well into the night when we started home, and the round moon was high when we stopped to rest in a piece of the lovely open woodland of that region, where the trees stand in a park-like freedom from underbrush, and the grass grows dense and rich among them.

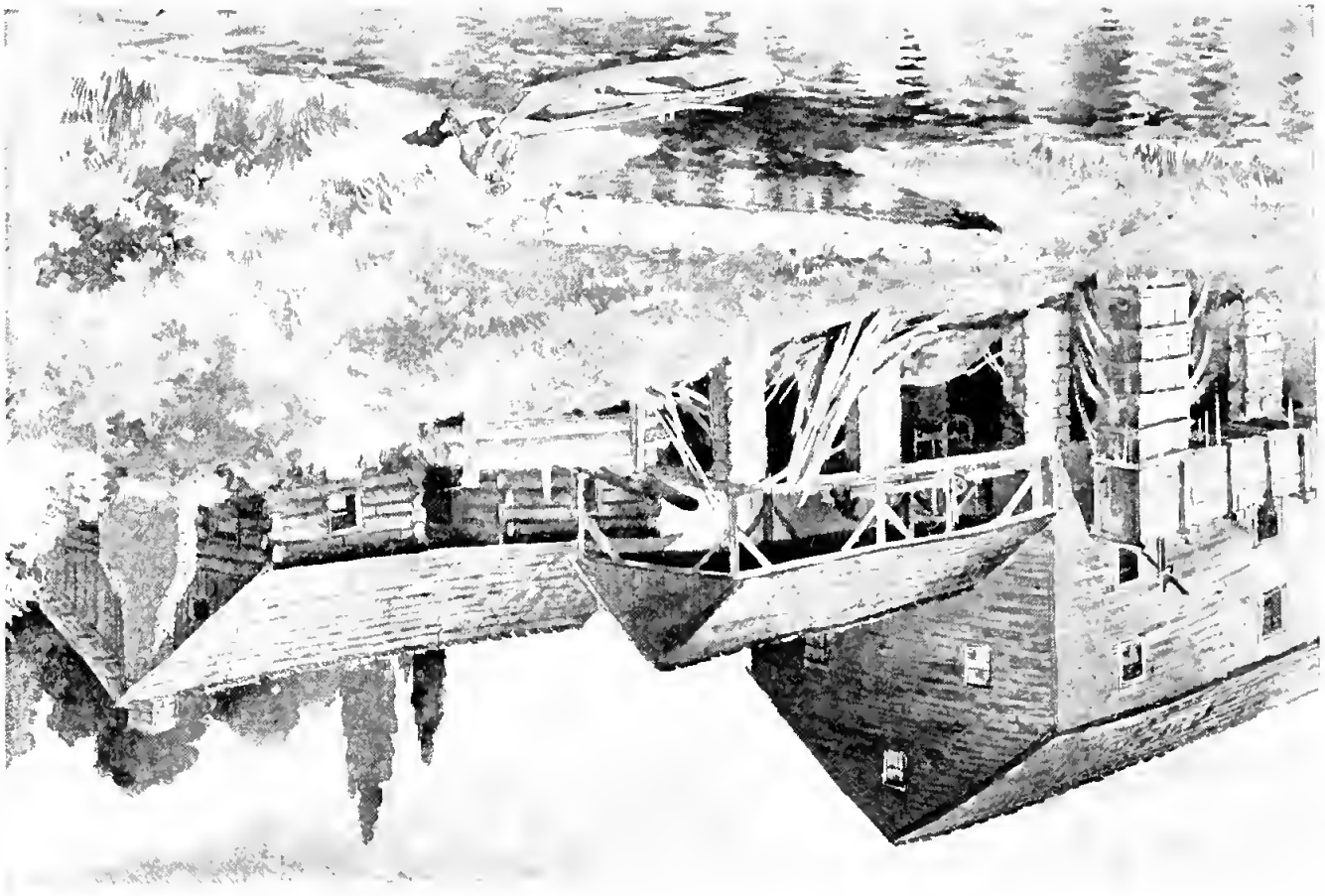
We took the pole, on which we had slung the bag, from our shoulders, and sat down on an old long-fallen log, and listened to the closely interwoven monotonies of the innumerable katydids, in which the air seemed clothed as with a mesh of sound. The shadows fell black from the trees upon the smooth sward, but every other place was full of the tender light in which all forms were rounded and softened; the moon hung tranced in the sky. We scarcely spoke in the shining solitude, the solitude which for once had no terrors for the childish fancy, but was only beautiful. This perfect beauty seemed

not only to liberate me from the fear which is the prevailing mood of childhood, but to lift my soul nearer and nearer to the soul of all things in an exquisite sympathy. Such moments never pass; they are ineffaceable; their rapture immortalizes; from them we know that whatever perishes there is something in us that cannot die, that divinely regrets, divinely hopes.

XI

OUR log-cabin stood only a stone's cast from the gray old weather-tinted grist-mill, whose voice was music for us by night and by day, so that on Sundays, when the water was shut off from the great tub-wheels in its basement, it was as if the world had gone deaf and dumb. A soft sibilance ordinarily prevailed over the dull, hoarse murmur of the machinery; but late at night, when the water gathered that mysterious force which the darkness gives it, the voice of the mill had something weird in it like a human moan.

It was in all ways a place which I did not care to explore alone. It was very well, with a company of boys, to tumble and wrestle in the vast bins full of golden wheat, or to climb the slippery stairs to the cooling-floor in the loft, whither the little pockets of the elevators carried the meal warm from the burrs, and the blades



of the wheel up there, worn smooth by years of use, spread it out in an ever-widening circle, and caressed it with a thousand repetitions of their revolution. But the heavy rush of the water upon the wheels in the dim, humid basement, the angry whirl of the burrs under the hoppers, the high windows, powdered and darkened with the floating meal, the vague corners festooned with flour-laden cobwebs, the jolting and shaking of the bolting-cloths, had all a potentiality of terror in them that was not a pleasure to the boy's sensitive nerves. Ghosts, against all reason and experience, were but too probably waiting their chance to waylay unwary steps there whenever two feet ventured alone into the mill, and Indians, of course, made it their ambush.

With the saw-mill it was another matter. That was always an affair of the broad day. It began work and quitted work like a Christian, and did not keep the grist-mill's unnatural hours. Yet it had its fine moments, when the upright-saw lunged through the heavy oak log and gave out the sweet smell of the

bruised woody fibres, or then when the circular-saw wailed through the length of the lath we were making for the new house, and freed itself with a sharp cry, and purred softly till the wood touched it again, and it broke again into its long lament.

The warm sawdust in the pits below was almost as friendly to bare feet as the warm meal; and it was splendid to rush down the ways on the cars that brought up the logs or carried away the lumber. How we should have lived through all these complicated mechanical perils I cannot very well imagine now; but there is a special providence that watches over boys and appoints the greater number of them to grow up in spite of their environment.

Nothing was ever drowned in those swift and sullen races, except our spool-pig, as they call the invalid titman of the herd in that region; though once one of the grist-miller's children came near giving a touch of tragedy to their waters. He fell into the race just above the saw-mill gate, and was eddying round into the

rush upon its wheel, when I caught him by his long yellow hair, and pulled him out. His mother came rushing from her door at the outcry we had all set up, and perceiving him safe, immediately fell upon him in merited chastisement. No notice, then or thereafter, was taken of his preserver by either of his parents ; but I was not the less a hero in my own eyes.

XII

I CANNOT remember now whether it was in the early spring after our first winter in the log-cabin, or in the early part of the second winter, which found us still there, that it was justly thought fit I should leave these vain delights and go to earn some money in a printing-office in X——. I was, though so young, a good compositor, swift and clean, and when the foreman of the printing-office appeared one day at our cabin and asked if I could come to take the place of a delinquent hand, there was no question with any one but myself that I must go. For me, a terrible homesickness fell instantly upon me—a homesickness that already, in the mere prospect of absence, pierced my heart and filled my throat, and blinded me with tears.

The foreman wanted me to go back with him in his buggy, but a day's grace

was granted me, and then my older brother took me to X——, where he was to meet my father at the railroad station on his return from Cincinnati. It had been snowing, in the soft Southern Ohio fashion, but the clouds had broken away, and the evening fell in a clear sky, apple-green along the horizon as we drove on. This color of the sky must always be associated for me with the despair that then filled my soul, and which I was constantly swallowing down with great gulps. We joked, and got some miserable laughter out of the efforts of the horse to free himself from the snow that balled in his hoofs, but I suffered all the time an anguish of homesickness that now seems incredible. All the time I had every fact of the cabin life before me; what each of the children was doing, especially the younger ones, and what, above all, my mother was doing, and how at every moment she was looking; I saw the wretched little phantasm of myself moving about there.

The editor to whom my brother delivered me over could not conceive of me as tragedy; he received me as if I were the

merest commonplace, and delivered me in turn to the good man with whom I was to board. There were half a dozen school-girls boarding there, too, and their gayety, when they came in, added to my desolation.

The man said supper was about ready, and he reckoned I would get something to eat if I looked out for myself. Upon reflection I answered that I thought I did not want any supper, and that I must go to find my brother, whom I had to tell something. I found him at the station and told him I was going home with him. He tried to reason with me, or rather with my frenzy of homesickness; and I agreed to leave the question open till my father came; but in my own mind it was closed.

My father suggested, however, something that had not occured to either of us; we should both stay. This seemed possible for me; but not at that boarding-house, not within the sound of the laughter of those girls! We went to the hotel, where we had beefsteak and ham and eggs and hot biscuit every morning for

breakfast, and where we paid two dollars apiece for the week we stayed. At the end of this time the editor had found another hand, and we went home, where I was welcomed as from a year's absence.

Again I was called to suffer this trial, the chief trial of my boyhood, but it came in a milder form, and was lightened to me not only by the experience of survival from it, but by various circumstances. This time I went to D——, where one of my uncles was still living, and he somehow learned the misery I was in, and bade me come and stay with him while I remained in D——. I was very fond of him, and of the gentle creature, his wife, who stood to me for all that was at once naturally and conventionally refined, a type of gracious loveliness and worldly splendor.

They had an only child, to whom her cousin's presence in the house was a constant joy. Over them all hung the shadow of fragile health, and I look back at them through the halo of their early death ; but the remembrance cannot make them kinder than they really were. With

all that, I was homesick still. I fell asleep with the radiant image of our log-cabin before my eyes, and I woke with my heart like lead in my breast.

I did not see how I could get through the day, and I began it with miserable tears. I had found that by drinking a great deal of water at my meals I could keep down the sobs for the time being, and I practised this device to the surprise and alarm of my relatives, who were troubled at the spectacle of my unnatural thirst.

Sometimes I left the table and ran out for a burst of tears behind the house; every night after dark I cried there alone. But I could not wholly hide my suffering, and I suppose that after a while the sight of it became intolerable. At any rate, a blessed evening came when, returning from work, I found my brother waiting for me at my uncle's house; and the next morning we set out for home in the keen, silent dark before the November dawn.

We were both mounted on the italic-footed mare, I behind my brother, with my arms round him to keep on better;

and so we rode out of the sleeping town, and into the lifting shadow of the woods. They might have swarmed with ghosts or Indians; I should not have cared; I was going home.

By-and-by, as we rode on, the birds began to call one another from their dreams, the quails whistled from the stubble fields, and the crows clamored from the tops of the deadening;* the squirrels raced along the fence-rails, and, in the woods, they stopped half-way up the boles to bark at us; the jays strutted down the shelving branches to offer us a passing insult and defiance.

Presently, at a little clearing, we came to a log-cabin; the blue smoke curled from its chimney, and through the closed door came the soft, low hum of a spinning-wheel. The red and yellow leaves, heavy with the cold dew, dripped round us; and I was profoundly at peace. The homesick will understand how it was that I was as if saved from death.

At last we crossed a tail-race from the island, and turned up, not at the old log-

* The trees girdled, and left to die and decay, standing.

cabin, but at the front door of the new house. The family had flitted during my absence, and now they all burst out upon me in exultant welcome, and my mother caught me to her heart. Doubtless she knew that it would have been better for me to have conquered myself; but my defeat was dearer to her than my triumph could have been. She made me her honored guest; I had the best place at the table, the tenderest bit of steak, the richest cup of her golden coffee; and all that day I was "company."

It was a great day, which I must have spent chiefly in admiring the new house. It was so very new yet as not to be plastered; they had not been able to wait for that; but it was beautifully lathed in all its partitions, and the closely-fitted floors were a marvel of carpentering. I roamed through all the rooms, and up and down the stairs, and admired the familiar outside of the house as freshly as if it were as novel as the interior, where open wood-fires blazed upon the hearths, and threw a pleasant light of home upon the latticed walls.

I must have gone through the old log-cabin to see how it looked without us, but I have no recollection of ever entering its door again, so soon had it ceased to be part of my life. We remained in the new house, as we continued to call it, for two or three months, and then the changes of business which had been taking place without the knowledge of us children called us away from that roof, too, and we left the mills and the pleasant country that had grown so dear, to take up our abode in city streets again. We went to live in the ordinary brick house of our civilization, but we had grown so accustomed, with the quick and facile adaptation of children, to living in a house which was merely lathed, that we distinguished this last dwelling from the new house as a "plastered house."

Some of our playmates of the neighborhood walked part of the way to X—— with us boys, on the snowy morning when we turned our backs on the new house to take the train in that town. A shadow of the gloom in which our spirits were steeped passes over me again, but chiefly

I remember our difficulties in getting our young Newfoundland dog away with us; and our subsequent embarrassments with this animal on the train, where he sat up and barked out of the window at the passing objects, and finally became sea-sick, blot all other memories of that time from my mind.

XIII

I HAD not seen the old place for thirty years, when, four years ago, I found myself in the pretty little town of X——, which had once appeared so lordly and so proud to my poor rustic eyes, with a vacant half-day on my hands. I hired a buggy and a boy, and had him drive me down to that point on the river where our mills at least used to be.

The road was all strange to me, and when I reached my destination that was stranger still. The timber had been cut from the hill and island, and where the stately hickories had once towered and the sycamores drooped there was now a bald knob and a sterile tract of sand, good hardly for the grazing of the few cows that cropped its scanty herbage. They were both very much smaller: the hill was not the mountain it had seemed, the island no longer rivalled the proportions of England.

The grist-mill, whose gray bulk had kept so large a place in my memory, was sadly dwarfed, and in its decrepitude it had canted backwards, and seemed tottering to its fall. I explored it from wheel-pit to cooling-floor; there was not an Indian in it, but, ah! what ghosts! ghosts of the living and the dead; my brothers', my playmates', my own! At last, it was really haunted. I think no touch of repair had been put upon it, or upon the old saw-mill, either, on whose roof the shingles had all curled up like the feathers of a frizzly chicken in the rains and suns of those thirty summers past. The head-race, once a type of silent, sullen power, now crept feebly to its work; even the water seemed to have grown old, and anything might have battled successfully with the currents where the spool-pig was drowned and the miller's boy was carried so near his death.

I had with me for company the boy of the present miller, who silently followed me about, and answered my questions as he could. The epoch of our possession was as remote and as unstoried to him as

that of the Mound-Builders. A small frame house, exactly the size and shape of our log-cabin, occupied its site, and he had never even heard that any other house had ever stood there. The "new house," shingled and weather-boarded with black-walnut, had bleached to a silvery gray, and had no longer a trace of its rich brown. He let me go into it, and wander about at will. It was very little, and the small rooms were very low. It was plastered now; it was even papered; but it was not half so fine as it used to be.

I asked him if there was a graveyard on top of the hill, and he said, "Yes; an old one;" and we went up together to look at it, with its stones all fallen or sunken away, and no memory of the simple, harmless man and his little children whom I had seen laid there, going down with each into the dust in terror and desolation of spirit. His widow probably no longer wears dresses of changeable silk; and where is the orphan boy in the oil-cloth cap? In Congress, for all I know.

I looked across the bare island to where

their cabin had stood, and my eyes might as well have sought the cities of the plain. The boy at my elbow could not make out why the gray-mustached, middle-aged man should care, and when I attempted to tell him that I had once been a boy of his age there, and that this place had been my home, the boy of whom I have here written so freely seemed so much less a part of me than the boy to whom I spoke, that, upon the whole, I had rather a sense of imposing upon my listener.

THE END